

Since he'd been nine years old, Aaron Brennus had always wanted to be a superhero. But now, lying as he was, his face in a pool of his own blood, with the light fading fast, he thought to himself that maybe it had not been such a good idea after all. Everything he'd read about superheroes forgot to mention the fact that it could hurt. Well, not that it hurt much anymore. He was cold now, more than anything, which confused him. He knew his blood was warm and he was pretty sure he was now lying in a good deal of it and yet he was cold. In fact he was shivering, then for a split second, he thought he heard his mom calling his name. He tried to lift his arm so she could see it, but something was keeping him from moving it. He tried moving just his fingers but something had wrapped itself around them, holding them in place. Then he realized there was no way he could have heard her voice, because he was sure that he was far from home and doubted anyone knew he was here but the people who had done this to him. Aaron doubted very much they were going to tell anyone.

Around him the colored lights danced through frosted glass in a rhythmic pattern. *Maybe this is what the Aurora Borealis is like*, he thought. There was also singing which seemed out of place. It was nice though, comforting. The singing too had a rhythm that seemed odd somehow, but he was not able to concentrate enough to understand it.

His shivering had begun to subside when he began to notice pieces of something small and white drifting down from the sky. They were falling so slowly that it was hard to make out exactly what they were. But something had begun to fall. They were sporadic at first, a meteor shower maybe of extremely small debris drifting slowly down from the heavens. Maybe something had burnt up in the atmosphere, an old Russian Satellite or something, that was now falling like ash onto the ground.

Refocusing his eyes onto the flat expanse that seemed to lie between him and everything else, Aaron watched the small white debris smash into the ground. He thought it very strange that there was no fire, even though some of them seemed to make loud crashing noises, like a hammer hitting metal in a deep cave. It was only after what seemed like hours that Aaron realized it wasn't ash, or meteors, but snow. It was beautiful, he thought, this snow shower in April.

At the moment the snow revealed itself to him, he realized something else. He was no longer cold. A peculiar, though hardly unwelcome, warmth had begun to wash over him. With this feeling came a new sense of everything around him. Calmness and acceptance began to melt the fear in his mind and made Aaron begin to forget how much trouble he was in and how exactly he had gotten here in the first place.

Under him, the ground shifted and became soft. This of course made Aaron think of home and of his own bed, and though just a moment ago he would have worried what his Mother would be thinking right now, and how frantic she would be at the fact he had not come home, he didn't think that now, or at least if he did it was of little concern and brushed away easily, as though insignificant. Everyone would understand later and be happy at seeing him and maybe throw him a party if he was lucky. Right now, however, Aaron was tired, more than he had ever been and he knew that the best thing he could do right now, the thing that would make everything all right, was to go sleep.

As Aaron Brennus began to close his eyes time slowed down, and a surreal sense of *deja vu* swept over him. *Had this happened some other time today, this slowing of time?* He couldn't remember. As a matter of fact he couldn't remember much of today if he really thought about it. But he needed to. He needed to know how he'd gotten here. He needed to

know why he was here. If he was going to die here and now, his head resting in this scarlet pool, he needed to know if he'd ever been a superhero, or just a dumb schmuck who'd got himself killed for now good reason. He knew it was petty, he knew it was selfish, Heroes didn't look back on their exploits to measure their own worth, at least not true heroes, but Aaron was just a sixteen year old kid who didn't have much longer, and that to him made all the difference.

So, as the falling snow stood suspended in the air, time now almost completely stopped, Aaron Brennus went back to the beginning. *That was what they always told you to do if you were going to tell a story wasn't it? He thought. Start at the beginning.* Aaron knew if he started there he could figure it all out. He may not know where the story was right now, but he was pretty sure that each moment would lead to the next, and that with each moment the whole would become more easily revealed.

It was like walking up a long set of stairs, he thought. *And maybe once you got going you could start to take the steps two and three at a time. Take shortcuts even.* But for right now he needed to take that first step. He was sure it would work; it had to. Otherwise he'd never know, and knowing was the second most important thing right now. Because, once he knew he could go to sleep, and Aaron Brennus wanted to do that very much. It was the reward he'd get once he knew. Once he knew if it had all been worthwhile.

So Aaron Brennus began to walk the steps of the day, one foot after the other. The initial furtive steps were as though rocks in the woods at night. He could feel them, but couldn't really make them out. After a few timid and quite unsteady steps forward Aaron heard something.

Somewhere in the distance Aaron heard singing again, or maybe it wasn't. It really was difficult to tell. It was so far away. It was a lilting, undulating tone that seemed to be getting closer. But soon the undulating waves of the note were getting flat, they were melding into a single tone. And soon that single tone became very loud and high pitched and eventually Aaron thought he knew what it was. It was just what he needed. It was the beginning of today.

The alarm. Every morning started with the same awful high-pitched scream that hurtled Aaron awake more with fear of something unknown than with a desire to start his day. He really needed to get a new one. Every morning was a rude, even brutal assault to his waking senses.

There was nothing special about this morning. He'd woken and gone to the bathroom to shower, but had to beat on the door to make his sister stop looking at herself in the mirror. When she'd opened the door, she'd screamed over the railing to their mother in the kitchen downstairs, as she walked past.

"Mom, Aaron's being a jerk again."

"Aaron, leave your sister alone," his mother had called up.

"But I didn't do anything," yelled back Aaron as he stuck out his foot and tripped his sister, who sprawled on the floor as he shut the bathroom door behind himself. But not before hearing his sister's half whispered retort.

"Asshole," which she distorted slightly with a slur just in case it was too loud and slipped downstairs, which it did.

"What was that dear? I didn't hear you."

"Nothing," she replied and moped off to her room.

The rest of the morning was equally uneventful. Breakfast without dad, who'd slipped away while Aaron was in the shower, and then a hurried race to the car.

Aaron wasn't quite old enough to drive by himself yet, nor would he probably get a car without buying it himself, but he had a learner's permit and had convinced his mom to let him drive to school every morning, with her in the passenger seat nervously fidgeting her hands in her lap. Aaron's father had agreed it would be good practice.

His sister sat mortified each morning hoping nobody saw and insisted she be let out at the edge of the drive-up to finish walking the rest of the way, while Aaron wanted to be seen. So, he got out almost directly in front of the school where his mother would then drive away leaving him a near God in the sight of his jealous peers.

Not that Aaron had many peers, or friends for that matter, but he was by no means at the bottom of the social pile. He had a modicum of friends and they had a clique of sorts that moved easily through the social barriers, even occasionally intermingling with another clique or two here and there. It might actually be said that Aaron was seamlessly integrated. In short, Aaron Brennus didn't stand out, which really was the best way to be in high school all things considered.

In his mind, arrival at school and first period were pretty much a blur so Aaron's mind took that two step climb and moved straight to the ringing of the first period ending bell, and straight to the conversation he'd had with his best friend Jack in the hallway heading to second period, which was English, and in which they sat next to each other except upon those occasions that Mr. Hubert separated them for being what he referred to as "the peanut gallery".

"So, did you ask her?" Jack said a little too loud for Aaron's comfort.

"I'm getting to it."

"Getting to it? What does that mean, getting to it?"

"I've got a plan."

"What plan?"

"She's in my Chemistry lab group isn't she?"

"Group, but not partner. She's ten feet away."

"It's a start."

"It's a death sentence. What're going to do, ask her to borrow her notes?" Aaron looked a little defeated and heaved a heavy sigh. "Oh God, you were. You were going to ask her for her notes. That's so fucking lame, dude."

"This coming from Casanova over here."

"I get play."

"What does that mean, you get play? You're no more seeing anybody than I am."

"Michelle Janus? What d'you call that?"

"You touched her leg while she was sleeping...in class."

"You're bein' a hater. Haters don't get love. They get hate. Is that what you want out of life?"

"Shut up. Just help me, OK?" Aaron entered the English class and Jack followed. They took up their normal places against the far sidewall, with Aaron in front and Jack right behind him. They'd gotten good at talking like this since Mr. Hubert's desk was diagonally across the room and so Aaron could easily turn to the side and appear as though he was watching Mr. Hubert talk and not listening to Jack.

"So, what's your plan?" Jack asked, as they pulled out their books and waited for everyone to get settled.

"I want you to tell her that I want to borrow her Chemistry notes."

"Jesus," Jack said, again a little too loud. Everyone in the room turned to look, including Mr. Hubert.

"Are we having a revival Mr. McCabe?" Said Mr. Hubert who had not risen, but was lowering his glasses down off his face to peer at Jack.

"No sir," Jack replied back.

"Good, because the peanut gallery you may be, I do not believe you are qualified to evangelize." The class chuckled at this having no idea if they should or not. With that, the bell rang and Mr. Hubert got up and began to write on the board. With his back turned, Aaron had just enough time to finish telling Jack his plan.

"She and I both have fourth period free. She usually spends it in the Library. You tell her I need to borrow her notes so that when I walk in there she'll know I need to see her and I won't have to stumble around looking for a reason to talk to her. See. A Plan."

"Why don't you just walk in the library and use the Chemistry notes as the reason to talk to her."

"Because then she'll know something's up."

"Oh, yeah, right." Jack just shook his head. "Fine. I'll do it after this."

"Thanks."

"What if she says you can't borrow her notes?"

"Why would she do that?"

Jack looked entirely confused by this and turned his attention to Mr. Hubert.

Aaron's mind was picking up speed now, moving through the day like it was a tape on fast forward. The steps, though not fully lit, were discernable in what now appeared to be more of a fog than a darkness. He could see ten or so steps ahead of himself, but not where they led to or even how high they went.

Every now and then he would stop, and slow down, and play the day's events back to make sure he hadn't missed something. But mostly he just forwarded through it. Aaron was overjoyed that this was working. Each little step leading to the next, but then, just before the third period bell rang and Aaron knew the next step would be him to the Library to talk to Sara, Aaron heard the hammer pound again in the distance. The room began to recede. The playback shuttered and halted and Aaron Brennus was pulled from his memories back to where he had come from. Around him the snow was still suspended and he was still lying with scarlet red surrounding his face.

He couldn't figure out what the hammer was. *Had he heard it somehow before he'd gotten to the library to see Sara? Did it even have anything to do with his day? Was it even important?* Aaron just couldn't remember. But the hammering didn't stop. And Aaron began to drift off again. Hopefully the stairs worked like in a video game and he'd be able to go back to where he had last been and not have to start from the beginning again. He really was tired and all this climbing had made him even more tired than when he'd started.

Around him the hammer pounded, then two smaller hammers answered. He hadn't heard these before. Their tone was higher pitched and seemed to accentuate or punctuate the larger hammering sound. *Maybe it's just drums or something like in a parade?* It was the only thing Aaron could think of at the moment. He was trying to find his way back to the staircase through the sheets of suspended snow. He wasn't actually walking through it though. He seemed to be still rooted to the ground, while the environment moved around him.

But as Aaron moved through the sheets of snow, or the sheets of snow moved through him, something caught his attention from the corner of his eye. It was a large snowflake, larger than the rest, or at least

closer than any of the other flakes. As he got closer to it he noticed it had black splotches on it, which was definitely something he hadn't noticed before.

Not knowing if he had a hand to use or not in this state, Aaron thought hard and tried to reach for the flake. To his great surprise, a hand came into view. It did seem to be his but it was translucent and worked more like an avatar's hand from a video game. He managed to close the fingers on the flake and began to draw it toward himself to get a better look. It wasn't easy though. The darkness around the flakes was viscous, restraining the flake from moving. So Aaron pulled and slowly it began to move closer to him. Eventually he got it close enough to look at.

To Aaron's great surprise it wasn't what he'd thought. It wasn't a snowflake at all but a piece of paper. Its edges were ripped and uneven and both sides had the black splotches, which were actually letters. It was a piece of a book. Aaron turned to look around him at all the suspended snowflakes. They were all pieces of books. *How very odd*, Aaron thought. *Why were pieces of books falling?* Aaron turned the piece of paper so that it was right reading and tried to make out the words.

It was cut and awkward, and seemed to make no sense.

*aiden gardens,
sh would bea
n your paint
es of life that l
pencil, or my p
ard worth nor
live your self in*

Why was that familiar? Shakespeare? It was Shakespeare. Aaron didn't really know how he knew this, but suddenly he did. Somehow his mind was working more truly and specifically than it ever did in real life, especially while he was taking a test. Aaron Brennus then

frightened himself when he suddenly realized it was Shakespeare's 16th sonnet. But this was soon lost to something else. Aaron, without really knowing had begun to climb the stairs again.

Hadn't Jenny Simpson been holding a Shakespeare book in her hands when Aaron had been talking to Sara? But if she had, why was it all torn up now? Aaron just couldn't remember. But as he continued to climb the stairs and the memories began to stitch themselves together once more, Aaron realized that the paper was what had been important. It had led him to Jenny, which had revealed the staircase, which had now returned him to where he had been before the hammers had called him away. Also, because he very much doubted Shakespeare had had anything to do with it.

Around him, his day began to move again and he was standing once again with Jack, saying goodbye and heading toward the library. The sheer thought of this made him happy. Not just because he was almost to the end, but because he would be seeing Sara again. He hadn't done much to try and flirt with her, but he was pretty sure he could handle it. He also hoped that he hadn't thrown up or anything, but realized he'd have to wait until he got there to find out.

The other kids around Aaron were kind of like his hand had been when he'd reached for the piece of paper. Unless he was directly interacting with them, as he had been with Jack, they were translucent and seemed to pay no attention to him. He thought it would be cool to always have High School be like this. Only the people you cared about would be in focus and the rest would simply be transparent and pass you by like ghosts.

As Aaron rounded the corner toward the library he started to feel a little sick. If it was from the apprehension of seeing Sara, then he would be OK, but it didn't feel like that. It was more dread filled

than nervous flutters of excitement. There was something odd about the hall leading to the library as well, it seemed to have grown darker here, and Aaron could smell something in the air. Somewhere, something was burning. What it was however, Aaron could not make out. It was familiar but not obvious.

Aaron felt a cold chill as he passed through the library door, and something yelled in his ear, and in the distance the hammers continues to fall. Once on the other side of the door though the lights were bright and everyone was where he now seemed to remember them being. Mrs. Pitts, the librarian was hunched over her desk doing some sort of paperwork. Jenny Simpson was leaning against a book case with the Shakespeare book in her hand, and Sara was sitting at the table near the back, peering down at something, and crossing things out with a pen. Looking back at the doorway though, the dread still lingered in Aaron. Outside the library things seemed to be getting dark.

Aaron pushed this away and looked back at Sara. He'd come this far and whatever it was that was going to happen had happened here, so there was nothing really to do but press on and see how it all ended. Or at least, see how it all started.

Even while studying Aaron thought Sara was probably the most beautiful girl he'd ever seen. Her bright red hair was long and had just a slight curl to it. Her skin was light and cream like and Aaron had realized that while most people hated freckles, they sure looked good on her. He thought they seemed exotic as though she were a spotted cat.

Sara looked up from what she was doing as Aaron approached the table. A small gentle smile crossed her face for a brief moment. Aaron could feel his heart pounding. *Maybe that's the hammering I keep hearing.* He thought, *It's been my heart all the time.* No, unfortunately

that couldn't be it. He'd heard the hammering long before now. *It was nice thought though.*

"Did Jack, uh..." he started.

"Yeah," she interrupted.

"So it's cool then?"

"Yeah."

"Great," said Aaron back, and they both just sort of stayed like that for a minute while the silence crept in.

Sara was the first to pull herself out of it. "Let me get the notes."

Aaron shook his head at this and began to look around. He felt uncomfortable staring at Sara as she bent over her school bag to retrieve the notes. When he turned back she was standing in front of him, the notes held out, while the end of her sleeve slightly covering her hand. Aaron noticed she'd almost completely covered her other hand in its sleeve as well. It was a nervous habit she had.

Aaron took the notes from her and she pulled her hand back. He opened the folder as though he was checking to make sure it was all there.

"Don't worry," Sara said. "I take good notes."

Aaron blushed at this and closed the folder. "It wasn't that, I know you do, that's why I wanted to borrow them. It was just..." There was that silence again as Aaron tried to both look at her and look away at the same time. She was looking both at him and staring down at the same time, her hair falling over part of her face.

Sara began to laugh a little. It was probably the most endearing thing Aaron had ever heard. Suddenly he understood why the sailors always wrecked their ships against the rocks when the sirens called. It would be hard not to if they laughed like she did.

"So," said Aaron.

"Yeah," replied Sara.

"Are you a doing anything this weekend?" He said this before he was able to stop himself.

"Uh, I guess," said Sara.

"That's cool," said Aaron.

"Yeah," said Sara.

But that was it. That was the conversation. Outside the Hammer fell in the most deafening way yet, and everyone heard it this time. Then there was a scream.

"What was that?" Sara pushed a bit closer to Aaron.

"Probably just a fire cracker." After he said this, Aaron knew it was wrong. It hadn't been a firecracker. That was when Aaron Brennus remembered everything. The elusive moment that would make it all make sense and make it unfold before him. And in the brief moment before his eyes finally shut, Aaron Brennus got his answer, the thing that even in this short space of time he'd locked down deep within the recesses of his mind so that he wouldn't have to think about it. The thing that had brought him to be here, in his own blood, seemingly alone, with strange lights dancing around him and oddly familiar singing echoing in his ears. A moment of time cut by himself, from the basic fabric of his life, was carefully stitched back into place.

He'd been in the Library, with Sara. He'd come to see if she would let him look at her Chemistry notes. She was so much better at math than he was and for all of the experiments there was a lot of math in Chemistry. He'd been talking to her by one of the reading tables when he'd heard a startling scream and a loud pop. A firecracker probably, which would lead to an inevitable locker search and school wide warning and chastisement, in what would undoubtedly be called a

mandatory assembly in the gym. When Sara had turned to look as well, two boys, dressed in black and army fatigues, and wearing knit caps, oddly out of place for April, had turned the corner and were entering the library.

Aaron thought he'd seen them around before, but didn't really remember their names. He thought one of them might be named Will, or William, and the other one might be Eddie Fitzgerald, but he couldn't be sure. They had on long coats and gloves with the fingers cut off, and they were carrying guns. Will/William had a shotgun and Eddie had a pistol in each hand. They were laughing.

As Will entered the library he raised his gun and shot Mrs. Pitts, before she even had time to stand up out of her chair to protest the noise. The shotgun blast sounded like a hammer hitting metal deep in some cave. Then everyone began to scream.

Here, in the library, just before the hammer hit him square in the chest. Just before he'd seen the flash of the muzzle. Just before he'd turned toward the two boys with the guns, Aaron Brennus has pushed Sara to the ground. He'd pushed her away. He'd moved her from in front of himself where she had been, talking to him about Chemistry notes.

She'd looked at him almost frightened as he'd grabbed her. She turned away from looking at the door and had begun to say his name. She had begun to protest, but that was fine. For the first time that day, time had slowed down for Aaron Brennus.

For whatever reason, time had given him a chance, it had allowed him to make a choice and take action. It had allowed him to see the guns. It had allowed him time to hear Sara say, "...What are you doing?" and in that time he'd been able to move her. He'd been able to grab her arm just as Will/William had raised his shotgun. It had allowed him enough time to look back into Sara's eyes and know he really liked her.

Most importantly he'd had enough time to push her down below the swinging hammer.

He didn't feel it so much as see its results; a red flower blooming in surreal time on his chest as he was thrown against the table he and Sara had been standing next to. The table seemed to take umbrage at this and pushed back, throwing him forward. Causing Aaron to fall.

Unable to control himself, he remembered landing on Sara, and the look of fear on her face. He remembered feeling her ribs crack with the force of his body against hers, and her small exhalation of breath, from the force and the pain, warm on his face, like a kiss. He remembered raising his head then and looking into her eyes, which were green, like emerald pools, and mouthing "It's OK."

Around them, the hammering didn't stop. It kept pounding though the screams. Around them, small fragments of book pages began to drift down, ripped from their tomes by the force of the shotgun's incessant hammering, falling like snow. Then Aaron lowered his head past her face, feeling her heart pounding furiously against his, he'd whispered into her ear. "Close your eyes. I'll protect you." Then he nestled his face against hers, resting in the sweet smelling pool of her brilliant red hair. Underneath him he felt her go limp as she took his weight into herself. The last thing he felt, was her fingers intertwining into his and closing tightly, pulling his arm to her side. Then time returned as though it had never left and the blackness engulfed the snow and all was dark.

Then, Aaron felt himself being lifted, and he was light as air. On his back now, he could see the ceiling slowly coming into focus. The snow had stopped falling. There were people here, speaking to him in muffled tones that reminded him of the schoolteacher on Charlie Brown.

One was leaning close saying something directly into Aaron's ear, but he couldn't hear them. Then something clear was placed over Aaron's nose and mouth and saw his own breath condense on its inside like a terrarium he'd once made in second grade. Then Aaron felt a prick in his arm and world went hazy again and he felt himself floating out of the library. He tried to look around to see if he could find his locker as the hallway went by. Then the sun made everything white.

Aaron was roused from almost sleep by waves as his body was rocked back and forth. He opened his eyes and tried to look around. Someone was beating on his chest and he could hear his alarm clock going off, a loud high-pitched whistle that went from a single tone to a more rhythmic and soothing pulse. For a moment he thought to himself that he wished his alarm clock did that all the time. The pulsing bleats were more soothing than the static tone. Then his iris flared as a bright light shone over it, then the other.

Turning his head as a gurney pushes by, almost close enough to touch, Aaron sees Sara being wheeled away. She sees him too and for a second the world blurs out of focus again, but not her. She smiles. Aaron tries to smile back but knows she can't see it though the mask.

His gaze on her is broken as they lift him into an ambulance. As the ambulance begins to roll and lurch gently forward, Aaron hears the singing start again, and in the distance the alarm begins to wail its single tone and finally Aaron Brennus was able close his eyes and go to sleep.

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